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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how helpful it is to treat, at the theoretical level, the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) separately from one another. It is commonly asserted that this is not the best approach, and that these four skills really have a great deal in common and it makes more sense to treat them holistically. This paper argues, to the contrary, that the four skills must be examined in isolation, individually, in order to look for parallels between the processes. The sum of the parts may be greater, and more practically helpful, than the whole. For instance, there has been much research linking reading and writing that it is now normal to see them referred to by their composite term literacy. A small group of second language (L2) learners is described in a specific classroom context giving a discursive commentary on how to focus on the development of the group's proficiency in reading skills. This works well because there are four main ideas behind it--scaffolding and then learner autonomy, which are not at odds with each other but are quite complementary, and active involvement and feedback. (Contains 15 references.) (KFT)

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Reading Theory as a Microcosm of the Four Skills

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In the first section of this paper we shall look at how *helpful* it is to treat, at a theoretical level, the four language skills separately from one another. In the second section, we shall imagine, and briefly describe, a small group of L2 learners in a specific classroom context giving a discursive commentary on how we could set about focusing on the development of the group's proficiency in reading skills.

Section One

There is a growing realisation among EFL teachers that the overt processes involved in language - the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking - which have been, in the past, "treated somewhat in isolation, in fact have so much in common with each other, that it makes much more sense to treat them holistically", (Wray & Medwell 1991:3). It has been noted that the links between reading and writing, for example, have been emphasised to such an extent that it is now normal to see them referred to as "literacy" (ibid.:3). Similarly, the term "oracy" is commonly used to denote the skills of speaking and listening.

This is no doubt true, even unavoidable, in the practical classroom situation. However, I would argue that to look at the four skills individually, in order to look for parallels between the processes is in theoretical terms, far more useful for those who strive to learn from these theories and use them in a constructive way. Thus, the sum of the parts may be greater, and more practically *helpful*, than the whole.

Each of the "four skills" is itself composed of component sub-skills. Grabe (1992:50-3) notes six in particular in the case of reading. These are: 1) the perceptual automatic recognition skill; 2) linguistic skills; 3) knowledge and skills of discourse structure and organisation; 4) knowledge of the world; 5) synthetic and critical evaluation skills; 6) metalinguistic knowledge and skills. It is arguable that these sub-skills are, to a greater or lesser extent, also sub-skills of writing, speaking and listening. This suggests that basic *strategies* used are similar, if not exactly the same, in each of the four skills. However, since the four modalities impose different constraints, at many different levels, on each occasion that they are called upon, they encourage a unique emphasis on particular combinations of strategies on each occasion.

In reading, the notions of "bottom-up" and "top-down" processing, (also known as "outside-in" and "inside-out" processing), are not without their problems. Consider this sentence (Wray & Medwell 1991: 98) "iF yuo aer a fluet reodur yuo wll hve on pRblme reOdng ths sNtnce". A purely bottom up strategy, which is essentially a code-cracking activity, simply cannot account for the comprehension of this sentence. Top-down strategies must come into play in order that the reader may find "meaning" in these symbols.

There is a clear parallel here with listening skills. An analogous situation, I believe, for EFL students who have only ever heard standard R.P. English spoken, would be when they find themselves listening to a speaker from inner-city Glasgow; indeed, this is a difficult task for many native English speakers; however, meaning may still be found by both groups. It is normal for language learners to report that they do not catch every word spoken, but that they, nonetheless, manage to understand the meaning of the sentence. Conversely, it is also common that the language learners report that they "understand" every word, but can not grasp the meaning of the sentence.

Stanovich (1980:36) "questioned the hypothesis-testing models" and rejected them "because they require[d] implausible assumptions about the relative speeds of the processes involved". Oakhill & Garnham (1988) assert that while good readers, and, by extension good listeners, may indeed "have greater contextual awareness, they do not, in fact, need to use it" and Samuels and Kamil (1988: 32) sum this up by saying that "if a skilled reader can generate predictions, the amount of time necessary to generate a prediction may be greater than the amount of time the skilled reader needs to simply recognise the words". So, a total reliance on top-down processing, while initially attractive, may later lead to some practical and theoretical conclusions that are less than satisfactory; for example, that the language learner does not need to develop much conscious knowledge of the features of written language, because the clause, or even the sentence, would be the most significant linguistic units, rather than the word. This is particularly problematic in reading theory, as L1 studies in phonological awareness, by Goswami (1994) and others, have clearly linked early ability to segment words into their constituent phonemes with later reading proficiency.

Stanovich's (1980) interactive-compensatory model, while not universally accepted, seems to account for the major problems encountered by purely top-down or bottom-up approaches to comprehension, because "process[es] at any level can compensate for deficiencies at any other level" (ibid.:36). So, it seems that comprehension, of written and spoken discourse, relies on a symbiosis of top-down and bottom-up strategies. Thus, the perceptual-automatic recognition skill noted by Grabe (1992) above seems psychologically real and theoretically plausible, both in terms of Stanovich's model, and of Underwood's (1982) assertion that "attention can only be diverted to higher-level activities, such as comprehension, when lower-level activities have become skilled through practice".

"Though recent findings... [by Danks & End (1985) and Lund (1991)] on language processing... are still tentative, they suggest that basic *strategies* focusing on the most important words in a text for example, and activating background schemata are the same in listening and reading... However, since the two modalities impose different processing constraints, they encourage *the emphasis of different strategies*" (Strodt-Lopez: 1996:35-6) (Italics mine). Thus, listeners tend to rely more on top-down processing, from "background *knowledge* to the particulars", while readers tend more towards bottom-up strategies, from "the particulars of the text to background *knowledge*" (*ibid.*:35-6).

It is true that in recent years both teachers and materials designers have concentrated mainly on developing the top-down skillsfor both reading and listening (See Paran: 1996). This seems to be the case because, while justifiable in theories of L1 skills, they have failed, to some extent, to recognise that the situation is somewhat different for L2 learners, as they have to "*compensate* for the lack of good linguistic *skills*" and for "the lack of well-developed automatised *skills*" (ibid.:29). Similarly, it is also true, to some extent, that there has been a lack of bottom-up support for the production skills, writing and speaking, because in recent years, with the advent of communicative language teaching, there has been an unnecessarily strong, though perhaps not surprising, emphasis by teachers, and materials designers, on communication at the expense of accuracy, perhaps due to misconceptions about what is involved in the communicative approach (See Thompson: 1996).

By looking at any one of the skills, reading in this case, we can see a microcosm of all the skills. We have noted how some of the more important sub-skills of reading are present in each of the other three skills. We have seen how the only difference is in their *emphasis*. It is my belief that in giving the L2 student both as much input and practice as they can reasonably manage, and a strong metalinguistic awareness, we, as teachers give the student the tools to learn a language proficiently. It is in equipping the student with both declarative knowledge, as well as the procedural knowledge, that they not only listen to the music, but also appreciate its subtle intricacies.

Section Two

In this section of the paper, we will consider some practical ways of aiding a particular group of students, in becoming more proficient readers. This imaginary group consists of about ten or so European students, of varied nationalities, in their early to mid-twenties. Let us say that they are of upper-intermediate standard. They are in Ireland on an intensive four week course; this course consists of four hours tuition daily, and two two-hour workshops each week. On the other days, there is an extensive, and carefully structured, social and cultural programme, which they are free to, and do, participate in. This group will be familiar to many EFL teachers as they are the backbone of many schools in Ireland and Britain.

One of the most important initial tasks for any teacher is the task of knowing his clients. The notion of needs analysis is absolutely central. Even with as few details as we have outlined above, there are certain things that we can assume about this group. First, given their age group, it is reasonable to assume that many of them will be students; their needs in English will most predominantly lie in the area of reading. University systems in Europe, unfortunately, are dominated by the grammar-translation method of language teaching, where, as often as not, English is only taught as a means to accessing literature, be it classical, technical or otherwise. Any of the group that actually work, will almost certainly be trying to improve their English, as a means of improving their job prospects or job performance; their needs will be much broader, but, nonetheless, the skills in written language are likely to be of most concern to them, as the written form is more formally bound than the spoken form.

Second, given the age group of our clients, they are almost certainly attending the course of their own accord. Had they not been so motivated, they could have spent two weeks lying on a beach somewhere sunny, drinking piña coladas, and not using their brains. It is also worth noting that the clients have opted for intensive courses, over and above the already taxing four hours a day tuition.

Third, the group is European. This means that they will all be literate; in Europe, so commonplace is literacy, in fact, that the students will probably have no thoughts on the subject beyond the idea that *everybody* is able to read and write. In terms of their English, being of upper-intermediate level, their skills in English language literacy are probably quite proficient in certain ways. This does not mean, however, that they are infallible. In other ways their L2 capabilities are severely restricted.

While the clients' individual learning styles and preferences, their past experiences in learning language, their linguistic aptitudes, their personalities, perhaps even their views on life, are probably all quite different, they now find themselves on a (reasonably) level playing field, culturally, linguistically and in many other ways too. It is this that the teacher must take advantage of.

All of the group will experience problems with reading, though it is probably true that they will have had, in some cases, several years tuition, and practice, in reading English. It is for the teacher to facilitate the strategies necessary for each client to solve his or her own problems. In approaching a text on an unknown topic with a class, it is often extremely beneficial to make additions to the text: adding pictures, a title, or perhaps even a short summary at the beginning. This permits, and even forces, the individuals to build up some hypothesis or schema, of what the text is likely to consist of. This aids in top-down processing. On the other hand, we also need to encourage bottom-up processing, and on occasions, this is may be achieved by pre-reading exercises; for example, a short brainstorming session by the class, after reading the short summary suggested above, can often yield a whole white board of material, without any intervention by the teacher. In this way the "collective consciousness" of the class may be tapped and focused.

Study aids are another useful aid to comprehension facilitation. Activities such as note-taking, underlining, summary writing and so on, can all help the student to reinforce what they have learned. However, they play a very helpful dual rôle: that of comprehension fostering and comprehension monitoring simultaneously.

Often, it can be helpful for the teacher to teach metacognitive strategies overtly, if not obviously. A common method of doing this in EFL is the "teacher think-aloud" method. A simple idea, where the teacher, or better still, the student, simply solves the problem at hand by going through it mentally, step by step, but voicing these steps all along.

An extension of this is the notion of *reciprocal teaching* and has been in the communicative classroom for many years, and has proven itself to be an extremely effective way of fostering the strategies of questioning, clarifying, summarising and predicting; this too is both comprehension fostering and monitoring, and is particularly good at fostering a "collective consciousness". The hallmark, of this form of instruction, is the lack of passive inattention, that often accompanies reading. Here the students take turns being the *teacher* being interactive with *his* or *her* students. For example, a number of students read some short passages aloud, and then the *teacher* asks questions, and leads a discussion, on the text. All the students are expected to "chip-in" whenever they can. At upper-intermediate level this can get quite noisy. The *teacher* asks for clarifications on any of the points raised and finally, the *teacher* summarises the section of the text, and makes predictions about what is likely to occur in the following sections. Reciprocal teaching is not only very effective, but it is also very popular with the students, too.

Why does it work so well? There are four main ideas behind it - *scaffolding* and then *learner autonomy*, which, surprisingly, are not actually at odds with each other, but rather complimentary; *active involvement* and not passive inattention, and *feedback*. It is in becoming acquainted with these ideas, consciously and sub-consciously, in declarative an procedural terms, that the learners in our imaginary group may flourish. With these skills, they may recreate this experience, even when reading alone; it is only by doing this that they may develop their proficiency in the skill of reading. In this very simple classroom procedure we can see some of the theory, outlined in Section One of this paper, put into practice, though given the space constraints of such a short paper, it is hard to do any justice to the notion that the development of a group's proficiency in any one skill is closely linked to the development of the strategies and sub-skills embodied in all of the four skills.

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